

VZCZCXRO3706
PP RUEHAO
DE RUEHCV #2655/01 2442116
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 012116Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6128
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6968
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5755
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1446
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2322
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0570
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1447
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3996
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2410
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 1005
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3752
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 1005
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0648
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0973
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002655

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: VENEZUELA/CUBA: MORE TORCH-PASSING VIEWS

REF: CARACAS 2527

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Charge met August 25 with several Venezuelan Cuba experts to solicit informed views on the likely impact Fidel Castro's absence from the scene would have on Venezuela and President Chavez. The Venezuelan Cuba-watchers predicted that the death of Fidel Castro would be a severe psychological blow to Chavez and undermine his Bolivarian revolution ideology. At the same time, the experts opined that Chavez aspires to be the leader of the international socialist movement and would try to fill Castro's "anti-imperialist" shoes. While noting that Chavez does not have as good a relationship with Raul Castro, they nevertheless predicted that Chavez would try to sustain a hard-line succession in Cuba. These same interlocutors praised the USG's "prudent" policy to date on the Cuba transition process. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Charge, accompanied by PAO and A/PolCouns, met August 25 with a group of influential Venezuelan "Cuba-watchers" to disseminate further the USG's post-Castro transition policy message and to solicit additional views on the potential impact Castro's death would have on President Chavez. Former Venezuelan UN Ambassador Milos Alcalay organized the August 25 roundtable as a follow-up to the Charge's August 16 lunch to discuss the same subject (reftel). Former COPEI presidential candidate Eduardo Fernandez, ex-Ambassador Eduardo Figueroa, Castro biographer (and once a Cuban-trained "guerrillero") Americo Martin, and former Secretary General of the Venezuelan Communist (also Cuban-trained) Party Pompeyo Marquez participated.

Chavez Without Castro

¶3. (C) All participants in the August 25 roundtable underscored the depth of President Chavez's personal devotion to Fidel Castro and predicted that Castro's death will be a significant blow to Chavez psychologically. They said the Venezuelan President has relied heavily on Castro's advice,

particularly during domestic crises. Fernandez opined that Chavez appears psychologically dependent on Castro and predicted that Chavismo without Castro would "lose its soul."

Others predicted that Chavez would try to radicalize his domestic program in the wake of Castro's death. Alcalay, for example, highlighted Chavez's continued political dependence on the Cuban-staffed health and educational "mission" programs.

14. (C) The same group argued that Chavez truly sees himself as the Castro's heir to the international socialist movement.

They believed that the passing-of-the-torch media images of Chavez's August 13 bedside visit with Castro revealed the true extent of the Venezuelan president's international ambition and "megalomania." Alcalay predicted that after Castro's death, Chavez would "expropriate Castro's words" for his own purposes, much in the same way Chavez already exploits the writings of Simon Bolivar. Retired ambassador Figueroa argued that without Castro behind him, Chavez's influence would diminish in Latin America.

Chavez and the Cuban Transition

15. (C) Drawing on their Cuban experience and contacts, our interlocutors predicted that the post-Castro Cuban transition will evolve spontaneously, and not according to a well-defined plan. They all assumed Raul Castro would continue to lead Cuba, but would rely heavily on domestic alliances, particularly his well-developed ties within the military. None of the Cuba-watchers believed the Chavez's

CARACAS 00002655 002 OF 002

relationship between Raul Castro could ever be as strong as his relationship with Fidel, although Alcalay argued Raul would still welcome the BRV's continued, critical economic support. Pompeyano stressed that Chavez is not very popular among the Cuban people.

16. (C) Our interlocutors did not discount the possibility that the BRV would potentially engage in military adventurism in Cuba, potentially choosing the hard-line side in a civil conflict. They did stress, however, that Venezuela has no tradition of expeditionary military action and that even the BRV would have to weigh the diplomatic downside of international isolation. Several suggested that in such a circumstance, quasi-military groups tied to the MVR, especially the Francisco Miranda Front, could serve as a vanguard intervention force. At the same time, former guerrillero Martin suggested that the BRV is engaging in "excessive arms purchases" to stockpile weapons for potential export.

Praise for U.S. Policy

17. (C) Drawing on the Secretary's and A/S Shannon's recent statements, Charge underscored our support for a future of freedom for Cuba that will be defined by the Cuban people, as well as our willingness to provide humanitarian assistance to a democratic transition government. He stressed that the Cuban people deserve the freedoms that we in this hemisphere have determined are their rights: the freedom of expression, the freedom to form political parties, the freedom to choose their own leaders, and the freedom not to be jailed for their political beliefs. Cautioning that they are more accustomed to criticizing U.S. foreign policy, the participants nevertheless universally praised U.S. policy to date with respect to the transition taking place in Cuba. They stressed that U.S. "prudence" would be decisive in facilitating a democratic transition.

WHITAKER